

# WILDFIRE

*Ashes and carcasses are the aftermath of failed government policies and environmental lawsuits. By Judy Boyle*

Ranchers are a tough bunch. Knowing their animals depend on them for food, shelter, and medical care during the worst blizzards and the hottest dry spells, they face weather conditions that drive others indoors. Toiling seven days a week, never watching for five o'clock to



*New fires in Idaho begin almost weekly. Smoke rises from the Indian Valley fire, 100 miles northeast of Boise on Indian Mountain, on Sept. 2, 2007.*

arrive, their homes are modest, and “vacations” are trips to buy new bulls or watch their kids in a high school rodeo. Ranchers’ children are taught that hard work is good for their character. Complaints are not accepted. A rancher’s reward for sleep deprivation, frozen fingers and stiff limbs during calving season is finding a still-wet calf shivering and barely alive that a dumb heifer has abandoned in the snow. It is getting that calf into shelter, drying it, and warming it up before tackling the job of teaching the heifer how to be a

proper mother. One thing that will reduce a rancher to tears is finding that now-excellent mother heifer, lying beside the still-smoking body of her dead calf, her udder and hooves burned off from a wildfire, and knowing the only way to end her hopeless situation is with a bullet.

In recent years, ranchers throughout the West have faced the destruction of livestock, seen the loss of wildlife, and shaken their heads over the devastation to the land caused by raging wildfires. These fires are the unin-

tended consequences of failed federal-government policies and never-ending, ill-informed lawsuits of environmentalists, which defy common sense and knowledge of the natural world. After a fire, carcasses of dead livestock and wildlife are found by searching the sky for circling vultures. Only after the final count at fall roundup can a rancher determine how many of his cows will not be coming home. Wildlife losses are not as easily counted except for the lack of young the following year or the missing animals and birds which normally frequent the fields and feedlots during the winter.

Idaho rancher Bert Brackett has found at least 50 of his badly burned and dead cattle following the Murphy Hot Springs fire in Owyhee County. He says that number may increase after the cattle, which the fire scattered over a vast area, are rounded up. Several hundred miles to the north, in the high country between the Snake and Salmon rivers, Melvin and Midge Gill, their daughter Shelley, and son-in-law Garrett Neal share equal hope that most of their cattle escaped the Poe Cabin fire and U.S. Forest Service back burn. During fall roundup, far-flung neighboring ranches sort stray cattle and call the owners. These will be welcome calls about fire survivors.

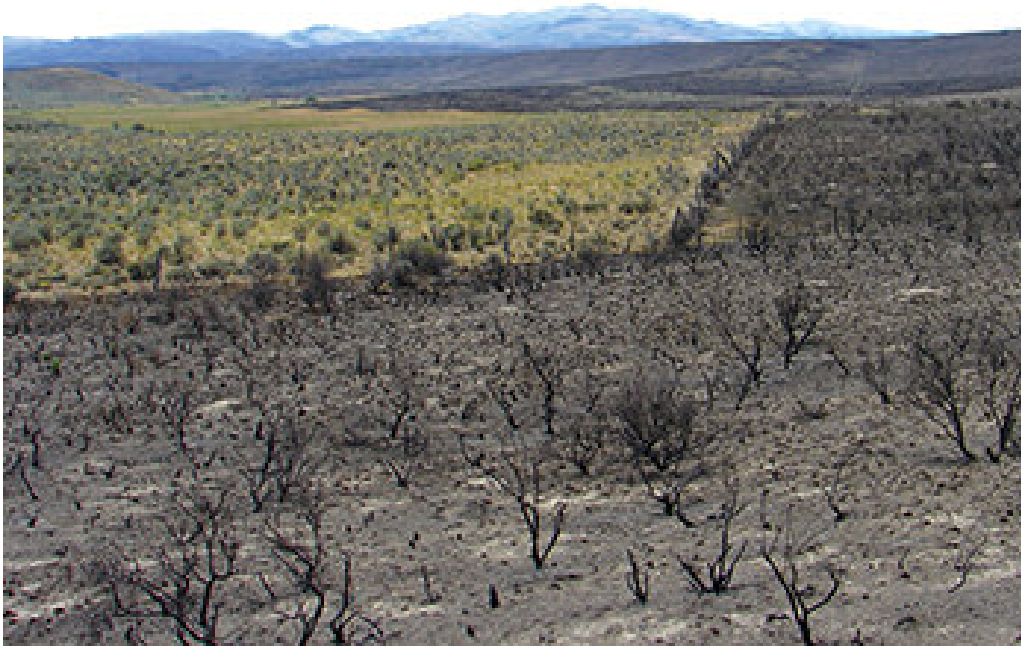
During the Murphy Hot Springs fire, the largest range fire in Idaho’s recorded history, ranchers and rural fire departments were frustrated at the lack of coordination and action taken by the federal fire managers. When the blaze was determined to be a “type one,” the local Bureau of Land Management (BLM) bosses turned control over to an incident commander from California. At one point, locals built a 40-mile fire line parallel to a dirt road, attempting to stop the fire. The federal crews were not given authority to fight the fire in that location and watched on a nearby hilltop with their pumper trucks.

“Those are good crews,” Bert says. “They just needed someone to take action and give them direction. The BLM fire managers are so paralyzed with the threat of lawsuits, they are afraid to do what needs to be done.”

The locals were holding back the fire when suddenly scores of jackrabbits, their fur on fire, ran out of the flames and across the road. The volunteers tried to stop the spreading flames but it proved impossible, and the fire’s march continued.

Bert and his brother Chet have been forced to watch as the Western Watersheds Project (WWP) sued to stop or greatly reduce livestock grazing on BLM’s Jarbidge Resource

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*Grazed and unburned area within the fence (background) compared to ungrazed and burned area outside the fence (foreground). BELOW: This area, normally used for fall pasture, was swept bare during the Poe Cabin fire.*

Area. The productive land raises an abundant crop of grass and forbs each year—more than the wildlife and cattle can eat. For many years, BLM had issued additional Animal Unit Months (AUMs) through temporary nonrenewable permits to keep up with the forage. WWP successfully sued to stop the increased AUMs and also reduced the current use of forage based on an argument of “saving” sage-grouse habitat. Ultimately, many thousands of acres of sage-grouse habitat were destroyed in the fire.

Chet Brackett gives an example of good management: “The private lands, stocked with native grass, crested wheat, and sagebrush are grazed in the spring and early summer. When the cattle move to other pastures, the regrowth of the introduced forage provides continuous feed for antelope, deer, and other species as native forage tends to dry up sooner. Because of the green, growing plants in the grazed areas, the fire doesn’t burn as hot or doesn’t burn at all.” (See photo above for example of grazed, unburned land compared to ungrazed, burned land.)

Watching dust devils swirl blackened soil high into the desert air, Chet continues: “We do not have to allow soil to be eroded away like that. The government should consider mixed plantings in their rehab plans. Crested wheat stands are easily established using relatively inexpensive seed, and they quickly provide soil stabilization.”

Several hundred miles northwest of the

Murphy Hot Springs fire, the Gill-Neal family has dead cattle from a fire. However, in their case it was not the original wildfire but an intentionally caused fire. The “island” of steep, forested country between two of Idaho’s famous rivers has long been home to Gill cattle. As a child, Melvin, 67, remembers riding from the lower ranch near Lucile into the high country to stay with his grandparents, who lived at cow camp during the grazing season. His great-grandparents raised cattle in Idaho County—which rivals Owyhee in size.

“In the old days, the U.S. Forest Service took fire prevention and control seriously. We used numerous methods that are no longer employed,” states Ace Barton. He served as the “fire boss” for the Forest Service (FS) for more than 30 years on the island and surrounding FS lands. Ace grew up on a Snake River homestead at Sheep Creek. The entire area, encompassing both Oregon and Idaho, is now known as the Hells Canyon National Recreation Area.

Ace continues: “I organized the entire area in a grid pattern and knew the tons of fuel on the ground, water sources, wind patterns, existing roads and trails in each grid. We kept a written record and detailed map for individual grids in the ranger’s office, so quick and effective action could be taken when a fire started. In advance, we created firebreaks on the ridgetops with logging equipment for a buffer zone. Firefighting crews were Forest Service employees, workers from the mill in

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Riggins, logging companies, local ranches, and various town and rural fire departments. Those folks were familiar with the country. It was where they hunted, fished, gathered berries and firewood. Ranchers and loggers were often the first defense and put out many fires before we arrived. Dozens of strategic lookout towers were manned all fire season. Besides plotting each lightning strike and instantly reporting smoke, lookouts put out small fires within one mile of their tower. Today, only three manned lookouts remain. Instead, the Forest Service relies on flights over the forest every 24 hours. A lot can happen in 24 hours. A fire can blow up long before the next plane goes over.”

As the northern fire approached, the ranchers began moving their cattle just south of the fall pasture, normally used during weaning. This was a normal seasonal movement of cattle as dictated by the FS annual operating plan. The fall pasture consists of 700 acres of meadows with scattered trees. A cabin and a set of corrals sit below the ridge. The large forested bowl to the south contains several springs and a healthy young stand of trees. Knowing that the 700 acres might be the only available fall feed left in the fire’s aftermath, the family, their neighbors, and the rural fire department worked hard to protect the area as the wildfire swept through.

Two afternoons later, with the fire miles to the south, Melvin, his daughter Shelley, and her husband Garrett drove back to their cow camp to check on the cattle. To their horror, they discovered firefighters conducting a back burn headed straight into the forested canyon where the family had moved their cattle. Drip torches were spreading flames in the high grass. The trees in the lower canyon were already torched.

“I asked them what the hell they were doing! The Forest Service knew we had cattle

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ABOVE: Bert Brackett's private land offers an oasis for wildlife in the wake of the Murphy Hot Springs fire, Idaho's largest on record, covering 1,000 square miles. LEFT: Normally used for fall pasture, this area was swept bare during the Poe Cabin fire. The forested canyon bottom is where cattle were burned to death due to a FS back burn.

HAY FIELDS © STEVE RITTER  
CANYON © JUDY BOYLE

down in that steep canyon," exclaims Melvin. "The firefighters told us they were following orders of the Fire Division supervisor, who is also our range management specialist. He later claimed he didn't know there were cattle in the area."

The family's pleas to stop the back burn fell on deaf ears. At that point, it would have been suicide to try to rescue the cattle. The family discovered another fire crew torching the bases of trees within a few feet of the cabin. Ironically, the back burn was of little use as the wildfire was already gone. The wet bowl of young trees refused to burn and neither did the trees by the cabin. Unfortunately, the precious fall feed was turned to ash.

The next day Shelley and Garrett walked into the still-smoking canyon. The only one able to talk, Shelley tells what they found: "Where the back burn had been the hottest were 20 of our cows and calves. Most had burned to death, but the rest...we had to shoot them." Several locals, tuned into the fire

radios, heard a discussion about how the backfire was going to "burn out the rancher." Years of disagreements with a Forest Service employee had come to a head. The FS has promised a thorough investigation of the radio communication. Nevertheless, the ranchers' trust in the federal government is gone. As they search for other pasture and additional hay, they brace themselves for the loss of more cattle. The fire also destroyed the Poe Cabin and many historic homestead buildings, including the home and barn of Melvin's grandparents.

Bert and Chet Brackett, Melvin Gill, Shelley Neal and many of their ranching neighbors have lived in their respective areas all their lives. "On the Murphy Hot Springs fire there were literally hundreds of years of experience with the prevailing wind patterns, water holes, roads and trails but

that knowledge was ignored by the federal fire managers," U.S. Sen. Larry Craig told a recent gathering of cattlemen. On the Poe Cabin fire, Melvin Gill showed a water-truck driver the closest water holes near the mountain ridges, replacing the two-hour trip down a narrow, steep road to the Salmon River. Sen. Craig, Sen. Crapo, and Idaho Gov. Otter have called for major changes in fire, grazing, and forest management. We citizens also have a responsibility to bring common sense back to federal land management. As the late Rep. Helen Chenoweth-Hage used to say, "When the people lead, the politicians will follow." Let's show them the way. ■

*Judy Boyle lives in Boise, Idaho.*

## ALL CREATURES LOST, LARGE AND SMALL



ABOVE: Idaho rancher, Bert Brackett. LEFT: Salmon River ranchers Garrett and Shelley Neal and Melvin Gill, center, discuss the Poe Cabin fire with long-retired Forest Service fire boss Ace Barton. Large numbers of cattle and wildlife were killed in the fires.

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"Thank God for the private lands which are island sanctuaries for wildlife in the middle of thousands of acres of black," says Bert Brackett. Brackett, a longtime Idaho rancher, watched antelope and deer race towards green hayfields during the raging Murphy Hot Springs fire in southeast Owyhee County. "The sage grouse that survived the fire gathered afterwards on dirt roads in confusion. Their next meal was not going to be found in the hundreds of thousands of acres of ash, which used to be their habitat." Some birds eventually found areas of grazed land which had repelled the fire. Those havens of sagebrush, forbs, native grass and crested wheat

provide the remaining food and shelter. Will it be enough for the birds to survive the winter? Thankfully, ranchers' fields and feedlots provide areas that sage grouse, deer, antelope, and other wildlife seek.

Elsewhere in Idaho where forest and sagebrush meet, more fires burn. Over the mountain crest to the east are four white plumes of smoke, each representing massive backcountry forest fires. To the northeast, two black towers rise hundreds of feet in the air from a forest and sagebrush fire. In the southeast, a smoke smear on the horizon soon explodes into a massive column, signaling a new sagebrush and grass fire. Idaho has been ground zero for wildfires this year—from the sagebrush deserts to the high-country forests and everything in between. Just one fire, the Murphy Hot Springs complex, burned over 1,000 square miles of land—the most rangeland burned in Idaho's recorded history. Several fires in the lush alpine forests of central Idaho each surpass a quarter of a million acres and were still burning in September. Repeatedly, people are questioning why this destruction is occurring across all types of western land.

Members of those groups who call themselves "environmentalists" are at the root of these destructive fires. They will protest and whine, but it is their insistent demand for the flawed management policies that have reshaped the landscapes creating the catalyst for devastation. Previously, humans and animals worked together to keep wildfires under control. Today, environmentalists' lawsuits prevent fuel management and hamper fire control. The constant threat of lawsuits has paralyzed federal agencies and prevented them from actively managing the land as they were trained to do. Even when fighting wildfires, agencies are often hampered from using all their tools—bulldozers, fire retardant, water ditches—for fear of disturbing or harming the environment or an endangered species.

Not long ago in the sagebrush and grass country, wildlife and ranchers' livestock shared the land together. They reduced the fuel load, making huge fires less likely to occur. Every ranch stood at the ready all summer, watching for the first waft of smoke in the air when every hand would go to work putting out the fire using all means available. In the forests, wildlife and livestock kept the fuels down to manageable levels in the areas between the trees. Active forest management

allowed for logging to space the trees appropriately, reducing the threat of fire reaching the crowns. Active management also kept diseases like root rot, parasites like mistletoe, and various wood-loving insects in check. Patches of dead trees were quickly treated. Loggers and mill workers were on duty at a moment's notice when a forest lookout called in a fire. Their intimate knowledge of the forest and heavy-equipment expertise stopped fires quickly.

Today, there is precious little timber management on the federal lands and grazing is severely restricted. Nearly all bands of sheep, which kept down the brush in the forests, are gone. Cattle numbers are reduced while many creeks and springs are fenced off. The result is years of old grass buildup. Timbered areas which used to be wide, parklike vistas are instead choked with overstocked trees. Those



Dee Conrad of Devil Creek Ranch lost 13 of her 16 registered quarter horses, including the stallion, during the Murphy Hot Springs fire.

few places on federal land where some logging is allowed cannot be called true managed forest. No trees can be taken from at least 300 feet (the length of football field) on either side of a stream, creating the perfect fuel load for a soil-sterilizing fire.

The environmentalists do not realize the irreversible harm they have spread across the West. Bert Brackett continues: "In their never-ending quest to eliminate livestock and logging, the environmentalists have destroyed what they sought to protect. By forcing their flawed vision of a perfect world without man's footprint, all wildlife and their habitats have suffered."

When a fire burns, we see the immediate destruction but only those who live with the land understand the real loss. From mice to elk, animals of all sizes are killed in a swift-moving wildfire. Those not killed outright have feet and hooves burned off, leaving an

animal to suffer an unspeakable death. Birds and larger mammals that escape the blinding smoke, flames, and confusion find nothing to eat and only ash-choked water to drink in the surrounding miles. Fish seldom survive the intense temperatures and other water-quality problems created by a wildfire. Fire does not discriminate for endangered or threatened species. All are doomed equally.

The moonscape left after a wildfire is uninhabitable. Soil is nature's basic building block. Hot fires sterilize the soil, leaving a hard surface which water cannot penetrate. When soil cannot absorb rain, massive erosion begins and fills formerly pristine streams with silt. The native seeds below the crust cannot receive moisture needed to sprout. Without man's intervention, many years are required for the land to recover.

Sterilized soil occurs in both the forest and the sagebrush country. Without healthy soil, there are no plants. And without plant life, there is no wildlife. The food chain is broken. Ace Barton of Riggins, Idaho, grew up in the Hells Canyon area of the Snake River. Ace is a retired 30-year veteran fire boss with the U.S. Forest Service. He calls the unseen small prey, "the little people whom the big people depend on." Mice become dinner for the coyote and owl. Chipmunks hiding seeds give a start to new plants. Huckleberries, thimbleberries, and elderberries give nourishment for many species from small birds to large mammals. Grasshoppers are gobbled by sage grouse, which in turn become survival food for numerous hawk species. Seeds provide substance for quail, which then are food for foxes and bobcats. This is basic science that city kids used to learn in third grade. Those raised on the land learn these lessons long before their first day of public school.

The environmentalist movement does not comprehend the big picture. Their triumphant press releases of winning another lawsuit to remove grazing from the landscape or stopping another timber sale speak to their ignorance of the natural world. If man does not manage, nature will. Can they truly believe a watershed devoid of life and streams choked for years is good simply because a natural event occurred? It is time for those who live with the land and those who appreciate wildlife to stop the destruction and join forces to bring commonsense management to the western landscapes.—Judy Boyle